

Introduction to the special issue “organizing and managing waste”

Heterogeneous answers to challenges raised by an heterogeneous material

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The anthropocene is the age of waste: CO₂ emissions are creating a new climatic order; plastic waste at sea invades the food chain; leachates infiltrate groundwater, and nuclear waste contaminates the Earth's basement with man-made radioactivity. The practical realities of *homo detritus* (Monsaingeon, 2017) have caught up with the theoretical fantasies of *homo economicus*. Less than 300 years of capitalist logic of exploitation and accumulation have created a world where a systematic, pervasive, relentless, and at times even celebrated production of waste has turned residuals from a matter historically held in the periphery of cities (Lynch, 1990) into an ubiquitous matter that permeates air, food and water – even to the point that an animated, full-length feature film for children, *Wall-E* (Stanton, 2008), builds on the idea that mankind might need to abandon earth after having covered it with garbage. With nowhere else to expel waste (Calvino, 1974/1972), life in contemporary waste-intensive society ends up being something that takes place *among* waste. Waste is by all means *in* society, and I suggest that we understand it as such.

From a public health challenge issued in the mid-nineteenth century (Strasser, 1999), waste has evolved into a challenge of today's global order of production and consumption (O'Brien, 2008). For example: Whose responsibility is waste? What does it mean to manage waste? Or, is waste the opposite or the consequence of efficacy? Because it focuses on the accursed share of the economy (Bataille, 1988/1949), waste opens a backdoor to economic practices, replacing a focus on what is produced and consumed by a focus on what is rejected and abandoned. In a paradoxical twist, waste lays the groundwork for an inhuman epistemology (Hird, 2012) that brings us as close as possible to what is eminently human: wasting.

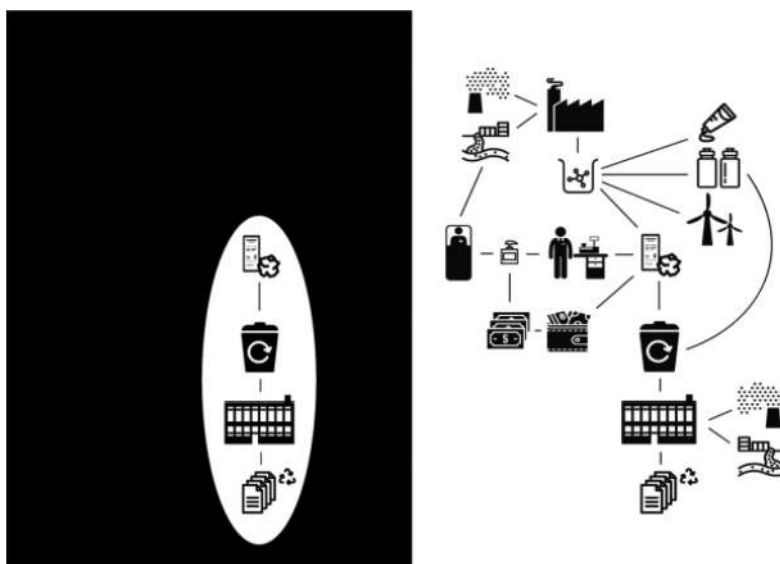
Waste has become the object of disparate research attention. Engineers have for a long time developed detailed knowledge about how to process waste to mitigate the risk that it represents and extract the energy that it contains, as demonstrated in journals such as *Waste Management*, *Waste Management and Research* or the *Journal of Cleaner Production*. However, the social sciences and the humanities are far from being outdone in developing our understanding of waste. For example, archeologists (Rathje and Murphy, 2001) have tracked down the historical intimacy of people tens of meters below the surface of landfills. Geographers have mapped international material flow practices (Gregson *et al.*, 2010) and drawn geographies of waste (Jewitt, 2011; Moore, 2012) that position it exactly in the urban metabolism (Barles, 2010). Anthropologists have used the cultural order of dirt (Douglas, 1992) and the material order of ruins (Edensor, 2005) to make clear the social order of valuation practices. Consumer researchers with an interest in sustainable consumption (Ekström, 2015) show a growing interest for the post consumption stages of the social life of things (Appadurai, 1986), in particular for food waste (Evans, 2011; Metcalfe *et al.*, 2012), but also for alternative modes of consumption such as second-hand cultures (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). And management and organization scholars have investigated, for example, the business models of waste management companies (Corvellec and Bramryd, 2012), the international travels of waste management ideas and ideals (Zapata Campos and Zapata, 2014) and circular economic strategies aimed at eliminating waste (Stål and Corvellec, 2018; Valenzuela and Böhm, 2017; Prieto-Sandoval *et al.*, 2018; Merli *et al.*, 2018).



Social-scientific and humanistic research on waste makes clear that even individual wasting practices are part of extended networks of organized practice – waste is a private matter that becomes public as Laporte (2000) observes. This embedment of individual wasting practices in organizational networks is aptly captured by a figure (Liboiron, 2018) in a recent editorial of *DiscardStudies.com*. *Discard Studies* stresses the need to zoom out our focus on waste-related practices to bring forth how they are inserted in their social contexts (Figure 1).

There is more to wasting practices than mundane individual decisions to put leftovers into bins (Woolgar and Neyland, 2013). Wasting is the socially determined outcome of an economic, material, symbolic, ethical, political and other orders. These orders remain largely invisible for individual or even organizational users, at least until the moment when waste collection and waste management collapses – a characteristic of infrastructures remaining invisible until they stop delivering their services (Star, 1999). But it is possible to make the organizing and managing of waste them visible as this special issue shows.

Representative of the global nature of wasting, the articles in this special issue bring to the fore the dynamic heterogeneity of the organizing and managing of waste. These articles take us from Canada to India and through Europe. Attuned to the organizational diversity of approaches to wasting, they show how organizing and managing waste is as much a matter of public policies as of corporate and individual practices. They lend their voices to the variety of actors who work with waste: formal waste officials as well as informal waste managers, merchants and consumers. Drawing on a multidisciplinary expertise, they bring to the fore the spatial, social, and legal dimensions of the composite material called waste. Limited as is any collection of articles, the contributions to this special issue provide an opening to how waste is organized and managed.



Note: That the drawing is original, but the present caption differs from the original one

Source: Liboiron (2018)

Figure 1. Wasting in its organizational context

More particularly:

- Aman Luthra from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Kalamazoo College, Michigan focuses on waste collection policies. Traditionally waste collection has been offered by individual collectors in an informal but highly organized way. However, handing over doorstep waste collection services to specialized companies requires that these services first be taken over by the municipality. Thus, paradoxically, municipalization becomes a condition of privatization and amounts to a transfer of responsibility and wealth away from individual entrepreneurs to specialized companies, with the former at risk of being thrown into poverty unless they are associated with the latter.
- Alison F. Stowell and Martin Brigham from the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology at Lancaster University Management School, share a similar concern for waste policy implementation with a focus on electronic and electric waste prevention. They show that the implementation of an e-Waste prevention policy in the UK rests on a diversity of imbrications of this policy with the heterogeneous yet related logics that characterize existing organizational practices of recycling, selling used equipment and repair, and that these fragmented imbrications might actually turn the policy away from its original waste preventing objectives of sustainability. A deep knowledge of organizational practices among policymakers emerges as a condition of success for waste policy implementation.
- Andrea Bortolotti from the Faculté d'Architecture La Cambre Horta, Université libre de Bruxelles, details the practices of recycling and waste prevention in the marketplace of Anderlecht. He shows how these practices intertwine the economic interests and environmental obligations of the company that owns the market with the waste management infrastructures made available, the business routines of stand owners, the purchasing behavior of customers and the physical qualities of packaging materials. The organizing of wasting and its prevention emerges as a dynamic assemblage that cannot be reduced to any univocal rationality, but instead calls on an open understanding as a nexus of rationalities that may or may not aggregate.
- Tino Bech-Larsen, Jessica Aschemann-Witzel and Viktorija Kulikovskaja, Department of Management, Aarhus University, explains how social supermarkets, food banks and expiration date pricing practices, conventionally viewed as social actions aimed at alleviating poverty, are increasingly being framed as environmentally friendly initiatives to prevent food waste, with a risk of no longer being perceived as redistributive practices.
- Finally, Amy DeLorenzo and Kate Parizeau, Department of Geography, and Mike von Massow, Department of Food Agriculture and Resource Economics, all at the University of Guelph, address the growing interest in the circular economy as a model for waste governance. They analyze how stakeholders in Ontario's food and waste systems perceive the legislative efforts of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change to promote a zero waste-circular food waste policy. They show that perceptions of waste policies are hinged on ideological perspectives that create lines of tension among actors, for example, whether to consider waste as a sign of economic wealth or of inefficiency or whether to act through bans or incentives.

Waste is a political matter. Activists who wander in New York, carrying 30 days of trash ([Greenfield, 2016](#)), who reduce their annual trash to a jar through "Refuse, Reduce, Reuse,

Recycle, Rot (and only in that order)” in a zero-waste spirit (Johnson, 2013), or who rescue and repair bicycles to incentivize a municipality to engage with waste prevention (Zapata Campos and Zapata, 2017) are but a few examples of the more-than-technical nature of waste. Correspondingly, principles of waste governance are contested matters (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2005; Hird, 2015; Johansson and Corvellec, 2018) that branch into sustainability, responsibility, justice and democracy issues. Because there is hardly any fold on Earth that does not already contain waste, and nearly all human activity adds new waste to the waste that already exists, humans of the Anthropocene face an urgent need to engage more systematically with their waste (Corvellec, 2019). The collection of articles in this special issue provides illustrative entries into what such engagements already look like and how they can be developed.

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